

# DG INSIGHTS

Issue 6, December 2008

From the DGG Knowledge Management Team

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## About DG Insights

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## Donor Harmonization in Zambia: Form without Content?

The Paris Agenda and donor harmonization for greater aid effectiveness has been an intensively discussed topic over the last couple of years. While still imperfect, a number of countries have started implementing the Paris principles at country level hoping that greater alignment of donor operations with government procedures would bring increased effectiveness and better development results. While it is too early to evaluate the overall impact of these aid effectiveness efforts on a global level, locally some trends and effects are already discernable. This brief note will explore how the Paris Agenda can shift the conceptual understanding of a sector and eventually affect programming options. To exemplify the intricacies of these linkages I will use the example of the governance sector in Zambia.

### *Division of Labor in the Governance Sector*

In Zambia, the five principles of the Paris Declaration - ownership, alignment, harmonization, managing for results and mutual accountability have resulted in a Joint Assistance Strategy (JASZ). JASZ is the cooperating partners' response to the Government's Fifth National Development Plan. It outlines which sectors will benefit from donor support and what role cooperating partners will play in each of the supported sectors.

Endorsed by the Government, this division of labor assigned 'lead', 'active' and 'background' roles to cooperating partners in specific sectors. The Governance Sector was sub-divided into nine sub-sectors, with designated overall lead donors for the sector as such but also with assigned lead, active and background roles to a number of governance sub-sectors. De facto the governance sector is composed of the following sub-sectors: Anti-Corruption, Parliament, Office of the Auditor General, Public Service Management, Electoral reform, Constitutional Reform, Access to Justice, Civil society and Governance and Decentralization.

Each of these sub-sectors is led by one or more cooperating partner while others might just have an active or a background role. The expectation is that the lead donor will coordinate the sub-sector response and act as interlocutor for government.

### *A Holistic Understanding of Governance*

These local configurations of the Paris Declaration collide with the conceptual framework under which governance work should take place. Although similar arrangements in other sectors proved to be more effective (basic social service sector or the macro-economic sector) in governance, the results are rather mixed. The point is, that dividing governance into sub-sectors essentially prevents cooperating partners from thinking of "governance" in a holistic way. What does this mean?

Governance can and has been defined in many ways. As is the case with all definitions, defining governance is to provide a response to the question: what is governance? As such any definition includes and excludes certain aspects and is hence necessarily arbitrary. Less attention has been paid to the 'how'-question. How does governance work? How does one sub-sector influence others? How are elites, pressure groups, institutions, processes, decisions etc. related to each other? In essence governance is much more a relational phenomenon than an ontological one.

Understanding Governance in a systemic (relational) manner views governance as a function of society (rather than the other way round). Governance issues are all interlinked. For instance: Political science instructs us that party systems are a reflection of social cleavages, that political institutions are a result of social struggles, that meaningful elections require pre and post requisites such as democratic practices within political parties (rather than one-man-shows), competing party programmes or a parliament that is not dominated by the executive. Likewise the respect for human rights is an essential element of free and fair elections, the fight against anti-corruption is intrinsically linked to the rule of law and the political culture of a country, public sector reforms cannot be successfully conducted without linking them to questions of accountability and oversight, constitutional questions require broad consensus within civil society and so on and so forth.

### ***Do Things Right vs. Right Thing to Do***

The list goes on but let us dig deeper and take a prominent example: elections. A lot is being said on how Zambia should conduct its upcoming election. Less has been said on the why, when and for what, of whether elections should or should not take place. This question, taken beyond the Zambian context, needs to be asked continually as the answers evolve with the various forms that democracies have taken and will continue to take. The same question also forces us to think politically. To think politically involves reflecting critically on what political agenda is being pushed in supporting elections. Procuring electoral material and sophisticated results management systems are certainly necessary to "do things right", but it will not compensate for the requirement that citizens are able to make an informed choice, which remains the bedrock of a sustainable democracy and would be the "right thing to do". Informed and choice are key words for understanding the nature of democracy and what democracy represents.

Even the most sophisticated voting system will not be able to replace the trust citizens should have in their political institutions. This trust will be difficult to establish if citizens are asked to choose between political parties that differ neither ideologically nor programmatically, if people are asked to choose candidates that they usually see during a campaign but hardly ever after and whose primary motivations appear to be less about their concern for the social, political or economic situation of their country and more about how to gain maximum access to state resources. The point is democracy is neither a state any country will reach nor a linear evolution towards paradise. There is no single definition of democracy and countries, governments, parties, movements and pressure groups will have to engage continuously and battle among themselves which definition suits them best. Some might opt for elections, others might not. That does not mean that their society is less democratic. After all, elections operate on the basis of a minority/majority scheme. How democratic is this form of decision making and societal conflict resolution as compared to other possible forms such as consensual decision making for instance? If elections are certainly an important ingredient of democracy it is not the only one, nor should it be the first step towards democracy. Ideally, it should be the last.

As controversial as these interrogations may seem they have the benefit of tackling governance issues from a relational perspective by establishing linkages between and among elements of policy, polity and politics and embedding them in their larger social context thus contributing to a holistic analysis of governance. In the current governance sub-sector setting the focus is more on avoiding overlaps and respecting each other's work areas rather than working together and jointly designing programmes in distinct areas that are nevertheless linked and form a coherent governance programme.

### ***An Agenda for Change?***

Adequate scientific research is an essential dimension for a holistic understanding of governance. Currently it appears that knowledge production is based more on case-by-case consultancies, applying methodologies that are not always based on scientific principles without contributing to a corpus of tested hypothesis and theories that could constitute a knowledge base for governance programmes to refer to. It would be essential for a content based harmonization agenda on governance to have access to scientific research on the sociological composition of Zambia's political elite, on voting patterns, on the path dependency of Zambia's institutional set-up, on the circulation of elites, on Zambia's organized interests and their influence on state policy, on decision making procedures and the existing veto points and so on and so forth. Hence a first step towards a holistic understanding of governance would require long-term support to a research agenda that is not determined by programmatic interests of cooperating partners but defined entirely by scholars and responding to academic criteria.

As argued above, the effects of the Paris Declaration at country level undermines a broad understanding of governance and compartmentalizes this sector in almost hermetically closed sub-divisions. It conceives of "Governance" as a technical and technocratic rather than a political problem. Where it is necessary to understand parliamentary reform in the context of the political party structure or accountability mechanisms or within the realm of a larger public sector reform, the harmonization agenda pushes cooperating partners to direct their support to the institution that embodies the label of the sub-sector, namely the parliament. Where it is beneficial to consider Human Rights as an essential

dimension of elections or access to justice, the division of labor amongst cooperating partners results in handling Human Rights as a separate programmatic area, precisely because some support the procurement of ballot boxes or training of judges, while others support Zambia's state reporting mechanisms on Human Rights through the respective ministry. Where anti-corruption programmes should be linked to public information campaigns on public sector reform or Human Rights programmes on community radio station, cooperating partners focus on avoiding the duplication and separation of tasks rather than establishing complementarities and relations between the different interventions.

To change this, donors might want to revisit the various UN reforms and attempts for developing "One UN" at country level. After all, the challenges the UN faces at country level to deliver as one are the same as those described above (too many agencies, fragmented programmes, different procedures and programming cycles etc.). Unlike the UN, donors have not yet started developing common programming tools, harmonizing their programming cycle and developing harmonized cash transfers modalities. It could be useful therefore to look at the experiences of the UN in developing the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), Country Programme Action Plans (CPAP), elaborating joint programs and implementing harmonized cash transfers (HACT). While such tools are particular to the UN, and have been implemented with mixed success, donors might find it useful to develop their own common mechanisms which would allow them to "deliver as one" and avoid becoming what they used to criticize the UN for, namely a conglomerate of different institutions with essentially the same objective but operating with bureaucratic procedures that place a heavy burden on Government.

In other words, donor harmonization as of now has a form but no content. It will be crucial in the coming years to shape donor harmonization not only around an agenda focusing on who is doing what but also on how things are done. A holistic understanding of governance will depend on cooperating partners' ability to link together to support individual sub-sectors, to establish programmatic relations between governance issues in Zambia, to mainstream support to cross-cutting themes across sub-sectors and to harmonize programme content. This will be the key to infusing content into ownership, alignment, harmonization, managing for results and mutual accountability and add some juicy meat to the rather dry bone of the current harmonization agenda for greater aid effectiveness.

\* This article benefits from comments and inputs received from Lena Margrethe Hasle, Norway.

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